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Don DeLillo, *Zero K.*

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Can death be eradicated? What language might our deathless selves speak? What purpose would their lives serve? In *The Value of the Novel* (2015), Peter Boxall argues that the novel form is best equipped to answer such questions: "under an emerging global regime that is almost unreadable to us," the novel in the twenty-first century "allows us to imagine and to make new worlds, to fashion new forms of accommodation between art and matter, or even to live in a condition of worldlessness."[1] The turn from historiography to futurography in Don DeLillo's postmillennial writing can be seen to take up this speculative task, and nowhere more so than in his new book, *Zero K*.[2]

The novel traces the story of Jeffrey Lockhart, a man in his mid-thirties whose billionaire father Ross has amassed an empire by "analyzing the profit impact of natural disasters" (*ZK* 13). In response to his wife Artis's terminal illness, Ross has become an investor in 'The Convergence'—an initiative that preserves people's bodies until the technology to return them to life has been developed. Here, Ross explains, "geneticists, and climatologists, and neuroscientists, and psychologists, and ethicists, if that's the right word" are hard at work "making the future" (*ZK* 30-33). Their aim, beyond life extension, is to '"design a response to whatever eventual calamity may strike the planet"' (*ZK* 66). The reader accompanies Jeffrey in his attempts to understand what this actually means, for his family and for society at large.

At the level of plot and form, *Zero K* is characteristic of postmillennial DeLillo. Thesparse style and linear narrative mirror the barrenness of its setting and the shaved bodies of those being prepared for cryogenic preservation there (what Jeffrey refers to as 'the shaved space,' 250). This juxtaposition of cryptic bodies and featureless desertscape, rendered in a language divested of frills, is reminiscent of

The Body Artist (2003)and *Point Omega* (2010), where shrinking or absent bodies, abandoned spaces and the ascetic language used to describe them mutually reinforce their texts' message: that "the true life is not reducible to words spoken or written."[3] But in contrast to these novels, the interplay of absences and silences in *Zero K* serves to underscore its faith in the physical. Towards the end, a character describes cryogenic preservation in effectively the same terms as Boxall describes speculative fiction, and the relationship between novel, bodies and real:

> We have language to guide us out of dire times. We are able to think and speak about what can conceivably happen in time to come. Why not follow our words bodily into the future tense? If we tell ourselves forthrightly that consciousness will persist, that cryopreservatives will continue to nourish the body, it is the first awakening toward the blessed state. We are here to make it happen, not simply to will it, or crawl toward it, but to place the endeavor in full dimension. (*ZK* 253)

4 According to this figuration, life extension is a form of bodily narration. The ultimate marriage of art and matter, it amounts to 'telling' ourselves to continue living, to continue existing beyond what we thought was the story's end, to indeed apply the rules of the novel to create the future itself—not only its representation.

In this sense, *Zero K* is perhaps closer to *Underworld*, sharing with it an abiding preoccupation with words and the real-world objects they describe, and an understanding that we make the future partly out of the past. Where *Underworld* looks to reclaim meaning from garbage and nuclear fallout, *Zero K* explores how preserving dead bodies (effectively human garbage) might enable "a radical level of self-renewal" (*ZK* 124). Where *Underworld's* protagonist Nick Shay (a waste management expert) looks at products in the supermarket and sees the garbage they will one day become, *Zero K's* characters imagine what their own dead bodies will look like.In both cases those tasked with reclaiming matter are posited as effectively crafting the future. This idea is further implied in the parallels Jeffrey notices between Artis's work as an archaeologist and the preserved bodies in their pods, which look "nearly prehistoric," like "archaeology for a future age" (*ZK* 256).

And, as in all of DeLillo's work, a faith in language's ability to redeem and render the world legible underwrites much of *Zero K's* narrative. One of the compound's members explains: "[W]e will emerge in cyber-human form into a universe that will speak to us in a very different way" (*ZK* 67). This understanding of a speaking world extends to The Convergence's plans to develop a language for the future. It is likewise manifest at the personal level, in Jeffrey's penchant for assigning names to people he doesn't know, and his childhood predilection for pharmaceuticals "impacted jargon of warnings, precautions, adverse reactions, contraindications." His hobby vividly recalls Eric Deming's fascination, in *Underworld*, with the warning labels on aerosol sprays.[4] In turn, the frequency with which these meditations on language and representation refer back to DeLillo's earlier works—Jeffrey's fascination with etymology recalling Nick

Shay's, the screens displaying silent footage of warzones and ecological catastrophes recalling those in *Players* and *Libra*—makes it tempting to read the text itself as an act of reclamation. It may even be DeLillo's swan song, combining strands of his previous meditations on language into one final work.

What is more difficult to square is whether *Zero K* stands up on its own merit. The dialogues between Jeffrey and his father are laboured, and the frequent use of elongated sentences featuring a statement followed by its modifier makes for strained reading. Likewise the characters (as has been said of DeLillo's work before) are not so much semblances of real people as mouthpieces for philosophical epithets. However, the novel also features passages of great eloquence, which vividly capture the idiosyncrasies of our new century, such as Jeffrey's description of The Compound as 'the hushed countermand […] to the widespread belief that the future, everybody's, will be worse than the past' (*ZK* 200). His figuration of how our body and mind engage with a smartphone screen is likewise exceptional: "Every touch of a button brings the neural rush of finding something I never knew and never needed to know until it appears at my anxious fingertips, where it remains for a shaky second before disappearing forever" (*ZK* 55). Such moments remind us of DeLillo's gift for explaining us to ourselves, and for picking out the minutiae that distinguish the subjectivity of one epoch from that of another.

NOTES

1. Peter Boxall, *The Value of the Novel* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 15.
2. Don DeLillo, *Zero K* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2016). Henceforth, *ZK.*
3. Don DeLillo, *Point Omega* (London: Picador, 2010), 15.
4. Don DeLillo, *Underworld* (London: Picador, 513-521).

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